Learning From Other's MISTAKES

By Lt. David Person

Last July, my father visited me in Jacksonville. He always has supported my naval aviation career, and, over the years, has hinted at wanting to take flying lessons. His visit seemed to be the perfect opportunity to share the joy of flight with him. I could not wait to give him a glimpse of my profession and had no idea just how complete it would be.

We rented a Grumman Tiger from an FBO in St. Augustine for a one-hour flight to Cedar Key, a remote community on Florida's west coast. The flight was smooth since the daily summer convection had yet to build. As we approached Cedar Key, we tuned the CTAF, made our required traffic calls and set up for a downwind entry to runway 23. The landing strip at Cedar Key is fairly short at 2,300 feet, but it's certainly manageable. However, the runway is 100 feet wide, which makes it look much shorter, and each end is surrounded by swampy sawgrass. I had been warned about the runway conditions at the FBO before departure and planned to land as close to the numbers as possible. The Grumman touched down 50 feet past the numbers, and we rolled to a slow taxi. As we neared the parking area at the departure end of runway 23, we discussed breakfast plans but were interrupted by a radio call on the CTAF from a Cessna that was entering the pattern.

My father and I shut down the plane and were pushing it to a parking space when the Cessna rolled final. What followed was disheartening. The plane floated down the runway, fast and long. It eventually touched down with only 300 feet of asphalt left. It appeared as if the pilot initially tried to brake but then elected to add power for a go-around. With 100 feet of runway left, the engine revved and the nose came to a sickeningly high attitude. They were going 40 knots when the plane smashed through thick shrubs at the departure end and then descended into the water. The main gear drug through the marsh for 100 yards before the left wing contacted the water. The plane then cartwheeled and pirouetted before smashing into an oyster bed on its back.

My father began trudging through shin-deep mud and weeds toward the plane. I joined him after a mayday call on the CTAF and 121.5. The going was rough, and I

Digital illustration and photo-composite by Allan Amen

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tried to prepare myself for what might be in the cockpit. As we got within 10 feet, the door of the Cessna 172 opened, and four muddy souls emerged, slightly cut but otherwise uninjured. This seemed miraculous, given the force and sound of the crash.

I began to review the NTSB report mentally: insufficient runway available to execute a go-around, extremely high DA, aircraft overweight, and crew inexperienced. The crew failed to identify hazards, to assess risks, to implement controls, and to break the chain.

What could I learn from this accident? After all, this guy was an inexperienced pilot with just over 100 hours flying a $40,000 aircraft. I am a Navy pilot with 1,000 military hours flying a $40 million helicopter. But as I thought about every mishap I've heard about in my Navy career, there were common themes.

Mishaps have the greatest chance of occurring when aircraft are flown at or near their limits, or when pilots meet or exceed their personal minimums. The Cessna pilot had exceeded both. He failed to identify and to avoid a perilous situation that left him at the end of the runway with no hope of stopping. He then demanded performance from his aircraft that it was unable to deliver. These links in the chain came together and caused this crash. We land aircraft all the time, but we also do so much more. We fly at night, from a ship, in horrible weather, over mountains, and in hostilities. The links in our chains are even more insidious and more complex. I realized the mechanics of a mishap are the same for every level of flying. Mishap avoidance is about breaking links, about going around early or about knocking it off.

Lt. Person flies with HSL-48.